

## **On Shifting Ground:**

### **First-time Parents' Ideal World of Paid Work and Family Time**

K.E. Kushner, University of Alberta Faculty of Nursing, Level 3 Edmonton Clinical Health Academy, 11405 – 87 Ave, Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9; 780-492-5667;  
[kkushner@ualberta.ca](mailto:kkushner@ualberta.ca)

N. Sopcak, University of Alberta Faculty of Medicine, 901 College Plaza, Edmonton AB T6G 2C8; 780-248-5843; [nsopcak@ualberta.ca](mailto:nsopcak@ualberta.ca)

R. Breitzkreuz, University of Alberta Department of Human Ecology, 330 Human Ecology,  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2N1; 780-492-5997; [rbreitzkreuz@ualberta.ca](mailto:rbreitzkreuz@ualberta.ca)

N. Pitre, University of Alberta Faculty of Nursing, Level 3 Edmonton Clinical Health Academy, 11405 – 87 Ave, Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9; 780-492-2813; [npitre@ualberta.ca](mailto:npitre@ualberta.ca)

D.L. Williamson, University of Alberta Department of Human Ecology, 302E Human Ecology,  
Edmonton, AB T6G 2N1; 780-492-5770; [dwilliamson@ualberta.ca](mailto:dwilliamson@ualberta.ca)

G. Rempel, Faculty of Health Disciplines, Athabasca University,  
1 University Drive, Athabasca, AB T9S 3A3; 780-435-8167; [grempel@athabascau.ca](mailto:grempel@athabascau.ca)

M. Stewart, University of Alberta Faculty of Nursing, Level 3 Edmonton Clinical Health Academy, 11405 – 87 Ave, Edmonton, AB T6G 1C9; 780-492-8038;  
[mstewart@ualberta.ca](mailto:mstewart@ualberta.ca)

N. Letourneau, University of Calgary Faculty of Nursing, PF 2282  
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, AB T2N 4N1; 403-210-3833;  
[nicole.letourneau@ucalgary.ca](mailto:nicole.letourneau@ucalgary.ca)

#### **Corresponding author:**

K. E. Kushner, RN, PhD

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Abstract

We examined first-time fathers' and mothers' perspectives about their ideal world of support in the context of dominant social ideology, ethno-cultural ideals, and the pragmatics of their everyday family, workplace, and socioeconomic circumstances during their first 18 months as parents. Twelve Canadian-born and six Chinese immigrant couples participated in individual in-depth interviews. We conducted a three-part analysis: fathers' perspectives, mothers' perspectives, and couples' perspectives. Fathers focused on fulfilling dual fathering ideals of 'time with family' and 'providing for family'; mothers emphasised fulfilling a mothering ideal of 'caring for children.' Examining couples' perspectives revealed a more nuanced understanding of their shared focus on 'caring for family.' Parents in this study found the current social ideal of the 'new' father, who is both financial provider and nurturing co-parent, appealing, yet difficult to achieve. Couples wanted informal (i.e. family and social network) support, along with formal (i.e. workplace and childcare) support to enable them to provide family care and financial stability for their family. Findings contribute to understanding family and paid work experiences and decision making among couples as new parents. We offer insights into the complexity of intersections among social ideals, personal expectations, family care, and paid work for fathers and mothers.

*Keywords: Fatherhood, motherhood, first time parents, work-family, gender, qualitative research*

## Résumé

Nous avons examiné les perspectives de nouveaux parents pour mieux comprendre leur vision du support idéal qu'ils aimeraient recevoir durant les 18 mois suivant la naissance de leur premier enfant. Nous avons tenu compte du contexte idéologique dominant, des idéaux ethno-culturels, et des demandes pragmatiques journalières au sein de la famille et du travail selon les conditions socioéconomiques des participants. Douze couples de parents Canadiens, et six couples de parents Chinois ayant immigré au Canada ont participé à des entrevues en profondeur. Au cours de notre analyse de ces entrevues, nous avons noté trois perspectives distinctes soient celles des pères, des mères, et des couples. Les pères de famille ont dit poursuivre les doubles exigences d'idéaux sociaux demandant qu'ils 'dédient du temps à la famille' et qu'ils 'pourvoient aux besoins' de leur famille. Les mamans ont mis l'emphase sur l'idéal maternel de répondre aux besoins de leurs enfants. Notre examen des perspectives offertes par les couples nous a révélé qu'ils partageaient une compréhension plus nuancée des idéaux sociaux et qu'ils concentraient plutôt sur une vision familiale des besoins et des soins requis. Les parents ont identifié que l'idéal définissant la responsabilité du 'nouveau' père de famille comme pourvoyeur financier et père engagé contribuant activement à l'épanouissement de ses enfants et de sa famille est attayant bien que difficile à rencontrer. Les couples ont donc souhaité recevoir du support informel (i.e., famille et cercle social) et formel (i.e., environnement de travail, système de garderie) pour leur permettre de répondre aux besoins de leur famille, et pour assurer la stabilité financière du foyer. Ces résultats contribuent à une compréhension accrue des dynamiques entre expériences familiales, travail rémunéré, et prise de décisions chez les couples devenus nouveaux parents. Nous

ajoutons aussi aux connaissances traitant de la complexité des intersections entre idéaux sociaux, attentes personnelles, besoins et soins requis au sein de la famille, et travail rémunéré qui affectent les pères et les mères.

Keywords: *Fatherhood, motherhood, first time parents, work-family, gender, qualitative research; [paternité](#), maternité, nouveaux parents, dynamique travail famille, genre, recherche qualitative*

## **On Shifting Ground:**

### **First-time Parents' Ideal Support for Integration of Family and Paid Work**

In the shifting social, ethno-cultural, economic, and political contexts of contemporary family life, understanding fathers' and mothers' perspectives on integrating family and paid work and their ideals about nurturing their children and providing for their family is warranted. In western developed countries, family scholars have observed notable shifts in family experiences of family and paid work including: mothers' engagement in the paid workforce concurrent with their family care in the home (e.g., Hattery, 2001; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989; Sümer, Smithson, Guerreiro, & Granlund, 2008; Wattis, Standing & Yerkes, 2013) and fathers' increasing involvement in unpaid family work, particularly in caring for children, in addition to their longstanding commitment to paid work (e.g., Coltrane, 1998; Dubeau, 2002; Miller, 2010, 2011; Plantin, 2007; Townsend, 2002a). Fathers' and mothers' unique (e.g., Draper, 2002; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Fox, Pascall, & Warren, 2009; Hays, 1996; Hattery, 2001; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Miller, 2005, 2011, 2012; Närvi, 2012) and couple (e.g. Ba, 2014; Bø, 2008; Hochschild, 1989) perspectives reveal valuable insights about dynamics. This is an important research focus because members of a couple do not experience parenting in isolation from each other. Indeed, among first time parents, evidence indicates that although 'there are his-and-her starting points, the transition into parenthood is *theirs*' (Keizer & Schenk, 2012, p. 771).

We sought to examine fathers' and mothers' perspectives about their ideal world of support in the context of dominant social ideology, ethno-cultural ideals, and the pragmatics of their everyday family, workplace, and socioeconomic circumstances during

their first 18 months as parents. We positioned our interest in first time fathers' and mothers' experiences in relation to the social ideologies of fatherhood, motherhood, and the autonomous worker as representations of 'a societal perception of what should be done' (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005, p. 166). We completed a three-part analysis to examine parents' perspectives individually and as a couple. Our findings contribute to an emerging body of knowledge about experiences of fathering and mothering in the couple context, specifically among Canadian-born and Chinese immigrant first time parents, the latter recognized as a large and increasing immigrant population in Canada (Chiu, Tran, & Maheux, 2007). Chinese immigrants are the third largest immigrant group in the urban study region; this region has the sixth largest urban immigrant population in Canada (Chiu et al, 2007).

We followed participants from pregnancy up to 18 months after the birth to explore their meanings, expectations, and experiences as they became parents for the first time. We found that during pregnancy, expectant fathers' and mothers' meanings and expectations about parenting revealed a potential disjuncture between how they imagined themselves as parents and what parenting, family, and paid work choices they perceived were available given their family, paid work, and economic circumstances (Kushner, Pite, Williamson, Breitzkreuz, & Rempel, 2014 ). The current study report of participants' experiences as parents from the birth up to 18 months continues to take up the contention by Marsiglio (2008) 'that there remains a need for intensive qualitative research that examines intersections among women's and men's meanings of parenthood, their expectations of themselves and each other as parents, and their perceived choices about

how they will father or mother within their family and social contexts' (Kushner, et al., 2014, p. 9).

### **Fatherhood, Motherhood, and Family and Paid Work**

Mothers and fathers often parent in different ways and societal expectations of mothers and fathers differ (Bø, 2008; Doucet, 2006; Fox, 2009). In Canada, for example, mothers accepted primary responsibility for infant care whereas many of the fathers viewed the intensity of their involvement as negotiable in the context of their provider responsibilities (Fox, 2009). Among stay-at-home fathers and their partners, dominant provider father and nurturing mother ideologies influence approaches to parenting, including enacting traditional gendered behaviors. For instance, fathers described themselves as more comfortable declining children's requests in contrast to mothers who were 'more inclined to want to please the kids' (Doucet, 2006, p. 193). Differences in parenting and orientation to dominant social ideals are evident in relation to socio-economic status or social class. Several studies have documented that although traditional gendered ideals of provider fathers and caregiver mothers were widely held by working class couples, they pragmatically shared nontraditional responsibilities (Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989). Deutsch (1999) observed that 'in contrast to middle-class couples, who often don't practice as much egalitarianism as they preach, these working-class couples practice more than they preach' (p. 193). Alternatively, in some recent studies, researchers found that men and women with higher socio-economic status were more confident in undertaking and supporting nontraditional parenting responsibilities than were those with lower status (Doucet, 2006; Fox, 2009). Although family and paid work responsibilities associated with mothering and fathering have converged to some extent

in recent decades, societal parenthood ideals nevertheless have remained gendered (Bø, 2008; Doucet, 2013; Dowd, 2003; Närvi, 2012).

**Fatherhood.** In recent decades, social ideals about fatherhood have become less singular compared to those for previous generations of fathers. Contemporary debate about fathers has tended to focus on their work inside the family (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). For previous generations of fathers, there was an almost exclusive emphasis on the responsibility as a financial provider for the family. More recently, this view expanded to consider fathers as playmates and role models, especially to their sons (Pleck, 2004). An additional ideal, characterizing fathers as nurturing and equal co-parents (Palkovitz, Christiansen & Dunn, 1998; Pleck, 2004), has emerged and directs men to be ‘involved as hands-on, emotional fathers’ (Finn & Henwood, 2009, p. 548).

Although contemporary fathers are expected to be emotionally involved in their children’s lives and to participate in childcare work, societal expectations of fathers to provide financially remain prevalent (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Loscocco & Spitze, 2007; Townsend, 2002b). The father ideology that being a good provider is integral to being a good father is a persistent theme in North America (Doucet, 2006, 2013; Townsend, 2002a; Williams, 2010). This ideology is reinforced by dominant workplace ideology that frames ‘good workers’ as autonomous individuals who are employed full-time, willingly work overtime, and take little or no time off for childbearing and parenting (Williams, 2000). The good worker ideology continues to reflect dominant masculine ideals and both employed men and women are expected to conform to this ideology that marginalizes family responsibilities (Williams, 2000; 2010).



**Motherhood.** Despite mothers' increased engagement in the work force throughout western developed countries, societal expectations persist that mothers' *first* responsibility is for their children's physical, social, and emotional well-being (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1996; Hochschild, 1989). Hays (1996) articulated this phenomenon of 'intensive mothering': The mother as primary caregiver is expected to 'dedicate her time and energy to attending to the child's needs and desires at each stage of development' (Hays, 1996, p. xiii). In Canadian society, however, more than seven out of ten mothers with a youngest child under 15 years are employed, including more than six out of ten mothers with a youngest child less than 3 years (Statistics Canada and Status of Women Canada, 2012). It would appear, therefore, that the ideal of an 'ever-present mother' is no longer realistic.

Women's perspectives about the dominant intensive motherhood ideal have shifted, arguably in response to their paid and family work realities. Such a shift is revealed through comparison of studies by Hattery (2001) and Christopher (2012) that each examined mothers' approaches to paid and family work in the context of dominant social ideals. Hattery (2001) interviewed 30 married mothers in the midwest U.S.; two-thirds were employed full or part-time, most lived in middle income households, and, with one exception, were white. The majority of women accepted intensive motherhood ideology yet also were guided by pragmatist consideration of family need, occupational opportunity, spouse's work schedule, and childcare availability. Over a decade later, Christopher (2012) interviewed 40 employed mothers in Canada and the U.S.; most were married, lived in middle income households, although household incomes ranged from low to high, and represented a diverse range of ethno-cultural identities. The majority of

women rejected the intensive motherhood ideology, instead constructing an ‘extensive mothering’ approach in which they ‘delegate[d] substantial amounts of the day-to-day childcare to others, and reframe[d] good mothering as being ‘in charge’ of and ultimately responsible for their children’s well-being’ (Christopher, 2012, p. 73). Comparing the findings of the two studies, it appears that although women’s approaches to fulfilling motherhood responsibility may be shifting over time, the ideal of mothers’ ultimate responsibility persists.

### **Chinese Cultural Context of Parent Ideals**

Traditional parenthood in Chinese societies has been constructed within a Confucian philosophy that centers family and filial piety as cultural values that are reinforced in social institutions and social practices (Guo, 2013; Luo, 2006). The adage ‘strict father, warm mother’ reflects traditional gendered ideals that position fathers as ‘masters of the family’ with power over financial resources and major family decisions and mothers as nurturers with primary responsibility for child care decisions. These ideals have been ‘assumed to guide families in dividing the family obligations and responsibilities and maintaining social order within the family unit’ (Chuang & Sue, 2009a, p. 333). In recent decades, however, social reform in China has contributed to shifts in parenting practices with fathers often actively engaged in child care and in joint decision making with their spouses (Chuang & Su, 2009b). Additionally, the Confucian philosophy emphasis on parents’ responsibility for children’s development of desired attributes including self-cultivation, self-restraint, and knowledge acquisition in pursuit of a purposeful life reflects social ideals that position mothers as well as fathers as strong disciplinarians (Guo, 2013). This emphasis has been linked with the ‘tiger mothering’

approach described by Chua (2011) that contrasts with the ‘warm mother’ gender ideal. Research on parenting among Chinese immigrants who became new parents in Canada (Chuang & Sue, 2009b) and in New Zealand (Guo, 2014) provides evidence that parenting and family functioning may be influenced and transformed by the immigration experience, particularly when the new country presents substantial cultural differences from the country of origin in concepts around social organization (e.g., collectivism to individualism, education).

### **Social Support for New Parents**

The experience of becoming parents for first-time fathers and mothers challenges their capacity to manage the multiple demands of family and paid work in ways that enhance family and child well-being and development (Buist, Morse, & Durkin, 2003; Harrison, Neufeld, & Kushner, 1995; Hudson, Elek, & Flek, 2001). Social support is recognized as a protective factor which facilitates the development of resilience (Stewart, 2000). Social support, including informal support from family and social networks and formal support from services and programs, is recognized as having an important impact on the experience of first-time parents (Fox, 2009). In Fox’s study (2009) this impact included enhanced couple relationships, mutually satisfying engagement in shared parenting, and personal time for individual and couple activities. Classic research indicated that gender differences in social support have contributed to awareness that fathers and mothers likely experience ‘his’, ‘her’, and ‘their’ experience of first-time parenthood (Wandersman & Wandersman, 1980). Researchers, however, have tended to examine men’s and women’s experiences separately, even in recent studies where participants were recruited as couples (e.g., Fox et al, 2009; Gameiro, Canavarro, Moura-

Ramos, Boivin, & Soares, 2010; Miller, 2005, 2011; Perry-Jenkins, Smith, Goldberg, & Logan, 2011).

### **Family Policy in Canada**

Socially constructed gender-based differences in fatherhood, motherhood, and workplace ideals are reinforced by ‘the ways that social institutions are structured by gendered practices and ideologies’ (Doucet, 2006, p. 246). Moreover, existing political and cultural structures in society influence gendered differences in family and paid work integration. The Canadian policy context, categorized with many countries in Europe, North America, and Australia as a liberal welfare state (Deven & Moss, 2002), reflects these influences. For example, since 2001, Canada has offered one year (50 weeks) of parental benefits: 15 weeks of leave to be taken by the biological mother and 35 weeks of parental leave that can be taken by either or concurrently by both parents. Administered by the Employment Insurance Program, benefits provide 55 percent of insurable earnings (with a maximum benefit of \$26,728 or \$514 per week) (Service Canada, 2014). Critics of the benefit have pointed out that because eligibility for maternity and parental leave are linked to employment and because of the gendered nature of paid work patterns, many women do not qualify for the program (Krull, 2010). This benefit remains underutilized by fathers because many families cannot afford to live on only 55% of a father’s income and workplaces tend not to support extended absences from work (Dube, 2008). Canadian childcare policy includes provisions for tax benefits for single earner families, taxable cash payments received by all parents of young children regardless of childcare choice, and income-based subsidies to offset childcare costs for low to middle income parents (Friendly & Prentice, 2009). These provisions have been critiqued as

offering a primarily fee-for-service ‘patchwork’ of programs constrained by a limited number of quality, regulated spaces (Friendly & Prentice, 2009).

The influence of social context including paid work, socioeconomic status, ethno-cultural diversity, family policy, and social ideals on support dynamics for parents as couples remains an important research focus. Social expectations about the availability of support for new parents may not align with family, employment, social mobility, and policy conditions. Our study reflects an effort to begin to address these issues by examining the intersections of social support, employment, policy, culture, and gender ideals for new parents as individuals and as couples during their first 18 months as parents.

### **Methodology**

Consistent with our aim to understand the perspectives of first time parents within their social contexts, we used a critical ethnographic approach (Smith, 2006). We theoretically triangulated the perspectives of symbolic interaction and critical feminism (Kushner & Morrow, 2003). A symbolic interaction focus on social interaction guided by interpretation of meaning (Stryker, 1980) directed our examination of fathers’ and mothers’ meanings and ideals related to parenting and how these shaped their perspectives about ideal social support and their decision making about family and paid work as first time parents. A critical feminist perspective, informed by Smith’s (2006) approach to inquiry, guided our examination of new fathers’ and mothers’ ideals about support for their parenting in relation to social ideology and existing social structures. We explored how participants’ perspectives and decision making as parents were shaped by fatherhood, motherhood, workplace, and ethno-cultural ideals, and family and workplace

practices and policies as societal institutions. Our inquiry extended ‘from where actual people are in their own lives, activities, and experiences to open up relations and organization that are, in a sense, actually *present* in them but are not observable’ (Smith, 2006, p. 4).

Recruitment and interview strategies to achieve socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity in the study sample were developed with guidance from members of a community advisory group, established for the study to ensure study relevance and facilitate knowledge uptake to inform local practices, programs, and policies. The advisory group included representatives from organizations that provided services for childbearing families, including prenatal education, parent support, and immigrant settlement. We recruited women and men who were becoming first-time parents, were employed full or part time (at least one member of a couple), and lived in the western Canadian urban study area. Participants were recruited from birth preparation classes and by referral from staff at agencies that offered services for families, including immigrant community health workers who provided assistance to immigrant families in adjusting to life in Canada and accessing supports and resources. We chose this latter strategy, recruiting families receiving assistance with adjustment to life in Canada, as an indicator of on-going acculturation, rather than using a time-since-immigration criteria.

A skilled team of project staff conducted all interviews. Participants were interviewed separately, in person or by telephone. To facilitate participant disclosure of individual perspectives, including potentially sensitive issues or different viewpoints that may not be shared or may be masked in the presence of the partner (Hertz, 1995; Youngblut, 1998), we interviewed members of each couple separately. Interviews were

scheduled at a time convenient for each participant; some consecutively with one immediately following the other, however many at different times to accommodate participant availability. We were focused on creating opportunity for each participant to share his or her perspective and less concerned about members of a couple talking with each other about their responses to interview questions. If one member of a couple made a comment such as ‘You probably heard about this from [spouse]’, the interviewer redirected to encourage the participant to share experiences from his or her perspective. Although many of the couples talked about some of the same experiences, their responses often revealed differences in details and perspectives. Interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviewer field notes documented the interview context such as interview setting, interruptions, and impressions immediately following the interview. We used NVIVO 10 software to manage data.

In the current report, we focus on the experiences of couples who participated in the final interview 9 to 18 months after the birth, when mothers had returned to paid work or decided to remain out of the paid workforce. The interview timing related to our interest in first time parents’ experiences of paid and family work, including social support and their decision making about and experiences following mothers’ return to employment or withdrawal from the workforce after the birth. For example, we asked: What has been most surprising for you since the birth? What has been most challenging for you? How did you make decisions about paid work and what influenced your decisions? After participants had shared their perspectives on these experiences, we asked parents: ‘In an ideal world, what support would you need to be the parent (mother or father) you would

like to be?’ Support was interpreted comprehensively as assistance, including personal, couple, family, workplace, and societal resources.

We examined the experiences of 19 families in which both members of the couple participated. As shown in Table 1, mothers’ age ranged from 20-37 years old and fathers were 25-38 years old. The sample was diverse in terms of socioeconomic status, and included Canadian born and Chinese immigrant participants. Couples were first time parents, with the exception of one couple in which the first time mother participated during pregnancy as a single parent and the birth father, who had children from a previous relationship, participated in the final interview. Three couples gave birth to twins, and one couple had a special needs infant. In most families, fathers were employed full-time in technical or professional occupations. All mothers had been employed, full or part time primarily in service, support, and paraprofessional occupations, until sometime during their pregnancy. Seven women chose not to return to paid work including the mother with a special needs infant, and one woman extended her leave of absence from paid work. Among the women who returned to paid work, five women returned part time; four of these women had been employed part time before pregnancy. The other woman had been employed full time prior to pregnancy, and although she initially returned to full time hours, she later reduced to part time. Five women, all of whom had been employed full time prior to pregnancy, returned to and remained in full time employment. Among the women who returned to the workforce, five were in professional and six were in paraprofessional, support, or service occupations. Occupational classification followed the groupings reported by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (2008). Family income was classified by quintile: low <\$40K, lower middle \$40-60K, middle



\$60-85K, upper middle \$85-125K, and high >\$125K (Ivanova, 2011). Six of the participating couples had emigrated from China one to six years prior to the study; all remained linked with immigrant assistance services.

We analyzed data using a three-part strategy. We first examined participant experiences individually as fathers or mothers, and then reviewed participant experiences as couple dyads. This strategy helped us to gain insights about couples' experiences, 'their story', by analysing and comparing 'his story' and 'her story' (Hertz, 1995). We used Simons et al.'s (2008) approach to thematic content analysis. This analytic strategy involves a search across the data set for substantive themes that are derived from codes and categories. Codes represent focused units of text about a particular aspect of the phenomena and categories represent sets of codes organized to reflect collective meaning (Simons et al., 2008). Codes and categories were refined and recurrent themes were identified through discussion among the first three authors. Our analysis included comparisons among women and men, among couple dyads, and between Canadian-born and immigrant participants. Analytic decisions and meeting discussions were documented to provide an audit trail throughout the analysis. To protect participant confidentiality within ethics approval, we assigned code numbers to track data and pseudonyms to present participant experiences.

We used verification strategies throughout the research process to ensure study rigor (Morse *et al.*, 2002). Evidence of rigor in this study included coherence or fit between the research question and research method, concurrent data generation and analysis, documentation of evolving interpretations and decisions, and theoretical thinking as emerging data interpretations were reconfirmed or modified in subsequent

data (Morse et al., 2002). In addition, we contextualized participants' experiences within "their particular historical, socio-cultural, political, economic, and embodied life circumstances" (Hall & Stevens, 1991, p. 25).

### **An Ideal World of Support for Parents**

Following the logic of our approach to data analysis, we present our findings in three sections. We first examine men's ideal world of support for them as fathers, exploring the thematic categories 'time with family' and 'providing for family'. We then consider women's ideal support for them as mothers through the thematic category 'caring for children'. Finally, we present findings from participants as couples, examining shared ideals as parents in the thematic category 'caring for family'.

#### **Men's Ideal World of Support as Fathers**

Our analysis revealed that fathers' ideal world of support for their fathering reflected a dual focus on fatherhood ideals to be involved and to provide. Fathers wanted support to have 'time with family' for practical infant care, play and teaching and emotional availability, along with support in 'providing for family' financial stability and security. Time seemed to be a sparse commodity in general; fathers talked about lack of sleep, increased amount of work in the household, limited leisure activities, and loss of couple time with their spouse. They also talked about time pressures from workplace demands and their challenges negotiating these demands to protect time with family. This focus was reflected in one high income father's wish simply to spend more time with his family, sharing breakfast and dinner with them.

I just need time. ....I don't see the kids in the morning 'cause I get up at around six and I'm out of the house by seven. Would *love* to see the kids in the morning. Have

breakfast with them. Go to work. And then, come home in the early afternoon, spend the afternoon with them, have dinner. So, if there was a way that I could do that ..., then I would love to do that. Every day.

Several fathers identified specific ways they wanted to spend their time, including teaching or playing with their child and being available to their child as a go-to person.

Striving to be both an involved father who invested time in infant care and his family and in providing financially, however, lead to tensions for fathers. Harold, an upper-middle income professional, declared, ‘I would love to be there all day every day, but I can’t, so at this point I’m providing and attempting to provide as much financial support as I can, to, to, you know, help us or allow us to maintain the same sort of lifestyle that we did up to this point.’ Similarly, Feng, an immigrant employed in a technical service field and earning a low income, clearly articulated this conflict, ‘I need to support this family. Yeah, and this is [a] contradiction. If I work, I don’t have time to stay with my son. If I don’t work, I don’t have money, money to support this family.’ Fathers with low to lower middle family incomes most centrally positioned financial responsibility in their reflection on an ideal world that would support them as fathers. A father who changed employment several times over the study period as he combined part-time professional positions to earn a lower middle income, said confidently, ‘I’ve got time if I have the money.’ For many fathers the financial pressure following the infant’s birth meant that reducing their paid work was not considered an option. Tyler commented on his situation as primary provider, although his spouse returned to part-time service employment to contribute to a lower middle family income: ‘It’s pretty much, yeah, like, I’m not going to say I’m trapped but it’s – I, I can’t quit. I mean, I gotta bring in money

for all of us.’ These fathers were most intensely mindful of the pressures to ensure adequate family income, although all fathers talked about this sense of responsibility.

Fathers indicated that their paid work demands were the main reason for their lack of time as fathers. A few fathers also expressed their frustration with dominant social ideals about good fathers in relation to the lack of support specifically for fathers. Luke described the pressure that resulted from expectations to adhere to the dual ideals of time with and providing for family, within societal ideals that were perceived as having little flexibility in relation to fathers’ provider responsibility. He commented, ‘That is like set in stone. No one really thinks about it. We just know that we gotta provide, [chuckle], you know. I’m getting it.’ Fathers’ experiences reflected a tension arising from the social ideals of the provider father and masculinity in Canadian society, which privilege paid work in masculine identity (Doucet, 2006, 2013), and ideals of the ‘good worker’ as an individual who is employed full-time, willingly works overtime, and takes little or no time off for childbearing or child rearing (Williams, 2000).

### **Women’s Ideal World of Support as Mothers**

Women’s descriptions of an ideal world, in which they could be the kind of mother they envisioned for themselves, focused on support for them to fulfill their responsibilities in ‘caring for children.’ They emphasized practical help such as cooking, cleaning the home, or babysitting. All but a few mothers focused on support from family and a social network of close friends and neighbors as foundational in their ideal world. Gay, an immigrant mother who did not return to employment, responded, ‘My mom and dad [would] stay with us...friends not far away and [a] neighborhood helping us.’ Several women specifically identified spousal support in talking about their ideal world; all but

one indicated that they felt well supported by their spouse. Almost all mothers talked about having their parents, particularly their mothers, nearby and available to provide support. Natalie, who returned to a full-time position, commented that in her ideal world, ‘My mom would be my neighbor’. Laura, who returned to part-time employment, reflected women’s focus on support from their family and social network: ‘In an ideal world, I think my mom might live next door. Somebody that – I mean, it doesn’t have to be my mom but just somebody that I have faith in as a caregiver and that is accessible. It would be really nice too to know my neighbors.’

Mothers felt responsible not only for the daily care of their infants, but also for their education, life experiences, and socio-emotional development. Similar to many of the mothers, Sarah, who returned to full-time clerical employment, expressed the mothering ideals that guided her through her early parenting. She commented, ‘I just want to make sure [my son] is always happy, that he’s learning good things and we get to spend a lot of time together. Yeah, I want to make, I want to create good memories for him growing up.’ Women appeared to subscribe to the ideal of a dedicated mother who is responsible for her child’s social and emotional well-being. This responsibility, however, also expanded to include concern for family financial security for many of the mothers, most explicitly for those who returned to paid work for family and personal reasons, similar to Christopher’s (2013) study. This perspective was evident for both Canadian-born and immigrant mothers, for mothers who returned to employment after the birth as well as for those who chose to withdraw from the workforce, and for mothers regardless of low, middle, or high family income.

### **Couples’ Ideal World of Support as Parents**

Examining men's and women's responses within couple dyads guided our attention to understand their perspective about an ideal world that provided support for them to realize their ideals as parents 'caring for family'. A more nuanced understanding emerged in relation to social ideals of fatherhood, motherhood, the family, and the workplace. As the previous sections reveal, examining fathers' and mothers' perspectives separately highlighted the pressures of dominant gendered social ideals that framed men's and women's experiences of family care and paid work. Men oriented to being involved fathers striving to have time with family and to provide for their family, whereas women oriented to being nurturing mothers caring for their young children. In contrast to the gendered complementarity of ideals as fathers and mothers, however, within-couple examination revealed a more complex intersection of ideals for most couples. Four perspectives emerged: support for shared parenting and providing, support from family and social network, support for a parent at home with young children, and, among immigrant couples, support for education. With the exception of a few couples who were experiencing relationship tensions related to differences in their perceptions and expectations, men's and women's perspectives about an ideal world of support for parenting reflected that they were 'on the same page' as a couple.

***Support for shared parenting and providing.*** The most commonly shared perspective among couples centered on the need for adequate workplace, service, and policy support as key considerations in decisions related to family financial security. These decisions had major implications for fathers' and mothers' contributions to caring for their family. Although most fathers did not have control to alter their paid work hours radically, some changed employment to reduce time spent commuting and others limited

or declined overtime work. Employed mothers, whether part or full time, described their workplaces as supportive in terms of positive workplace relationships and informal flexibility in work hours, including time for medical appointments and, for a few women, occasional opportunity to complete work at home. One woman talked more extensively about formal workplace support for her to transfer to a position that did not require extensive travel and that more readily accommodated family care responsibilities.

Couples recognized that for fathers prioritizing their paid work to provide financially as the main income earner for their family meant compromising time with their child and family. Couples also acknowledged that fathers' decisions to prioritize their time with family and to reduce paid work commitments could have negative consequences for their employment opportunities and capacity to provide financial security for their family.

Couples wanted fathers to 'be around' for their children, not only to be physically present to share mealtimes and to play with their children, but also to develop a strong relationship. The perspective of most couples in the study is illustrated by Scott and his spouse. Scott, employed in middle management in the business sector, said, 'In an ideal world, I would be a father who's around all the time. I, I'm not a workaholic and I don't want to be a workaholic. I don't want to be a father that's always gone and doesn't get to see, you know, his family grow up.' His comments illustrated fathers' desire to be involved in caring for their children, consistent with the ideal of the 'nurturant' father (Henwood & Proctor, 2003), but also their need to contend with workplace expectations that created challenges to living this ideal. Scott described his workplace as providing informal support from colleagues who were parents and from his 'boss' who was accommodating. Scott described his boss as 'understanding... if I need to take time off to

take [son] to appointments or if I'm going to be a little bit late because I need to stick around with him.' However, he indicated that formal workplace policy support, such as family leave, was not provided. Scott's spouse had returned to her full-time clerical position, and commented that, 'I think financially, you know, I really needed to go back to work. I don't think that we can live on just one income...we still wanted to have nice things, to go on vacations.' As the end of her one year parental leave had approached, the couple had interviewed several childcare providers before deciding on a day home situation that they believed provided the high quality care they expected. She indicated that she and Scott enjoyed being parents and described her ideal world of support as having the opportunity for part-time employment and Scott being more available to support her and to participate in family caring activities with her.

Couples talked about their decision making about paid work for each of them. They considered their potential earning power and available high quality childcare, either daycare or a nanny to support personal well-being, parenting, and employment choices. One father, when prompted about decision making with his spouse, Natalie, commented, 'It was a no-brainer. Um, there was really no discussion about me not working, being the primary earner. Just because with my benefits and the vehicle, you know, the money that we make it's a steady income for not a lot of work.' This father's employment in a technical service field earned an income with sufficient benefits that, combined with Natalie's full-time service position, provided a middle family income that allowed the couple to meet their financial commitments. Both he and Natalie, however, each talked about financial pressures. Whereas Natalie included financial security along with family support in her ideal world response, this father's emphasis on support to provide for



family financial security was framed by his view that ‘there really is no ideal world, you know, no situation that really works for the average person.’ He seemed to be suggesting that the ideal was unattainable given his current employment situation.

Couples in our study realized that for fathers to be more actively involved in their children’s lives they needed to realign their time at paid work and at home. A few fathers made a conscious choice to prioritize their family involvement. Alan, for instance, indicated that although his paid work was important to him, he tried to give priority to his family. Putting his ‘family first’, however, affected his status in a male-dominated professional field with a company in which he had been identified for progressive promotions:

‘It’s sort of a call I made... I don’t need to be the top-ranked in the company. I like to be respected but I have bigger priorities on the side. An extra half hour to do something at work is an extra half hour to play with [my child]. They ranked me lower. So, like I said, my work balance will be different than everybody else’s. It feels like a maturity thing. I’m not sure yet. I guess I’ll know in five more years.’

Alan’s spouse, who had not returned to paid work and was expecting their second infant, described him as ‘a great hands-on dad’ who was involved in household work when he was home. She described the challenges he faced in setting boundaries on paid work demands and protecting time for family caring responsibilities:

‘He’s had to sort of put his foot down and make it really clear over and over and over and over again. So they’re not very accommodating in that respect...

they put a lot of pressure. And maybe it's like that with every company. They have a lot of expectations, they talk about work life balance but they really hope you choose work over life balance. And [Alan] is really pro life balance.... He wants to come home at a decent hour where he can have supper with us. And I think that they would prefer that there would be somebody who would stay there 'til eight o'clock at night. And that's not going to be him.'

She also described promising indications of a shift in her spouse's workplace support, commenting, 'Lately they've been a little bit more relaxed on that. 'Cause there's not only him, there's another guy also whose wife is due around the same time as me. So they're starting to recognize, okay, they're not going to be here and we need to make other accommodations.'

The tensions experienced by the fathers between meeting ideals for time with and providing for family were recognized by the mothers; they supported their spouses as involved fathers but did not challenge their decision making about the relative primacy of provider responsibilities. Even though some mothers expressed disappointment with their spouse's decisions, they nevertheless acknowledged pressures for fathers to provide financially and did not want to jeopardize their employment situations. Laura commented on the decision that her spouse made not to take parental leave:

'I was surprised that he chose not to do that. But I mean, his rationale for it was sound. It was, you know, financial, but also he said that there was a stigma attached to it, he didn't want to do that. But we also, um, became parents during the busiest

time for his – it would have been bad for business that’s for sure. And I get that, you know, I understand that.’

Laura, similar to several women’s situations in our study, shared that although she had hoped her spouse would take parental leave, she ultimately supported him in his decision.

Within couples, men’s paid work status was acknowledged as a necessity. Whereas men described limited access to workplace support to meet family care responsibilities, women who returned to paid work described access to informally supportive workplace environments. Women responded to the family life and paid work challenge primarily by looking to close family members, particularly their mothers, and a network of friends and neighbors for support to meet family care responsibilities. This support provided a means for mothers to mitigate some of fathers’ tensions in dealing with the dual ideals of time with and providing for family.

***Support from family and social network.*** For several couples, the ideal world of support for them as parents included having family available to provide assistance when needed and a social network of friends and neighbors with shared interests in parenting. Eliza, who returned to full-time employment as an administrator and who felt fortunate to have her own mother in the neighborhood, commented:

‘My mom is awesome. Like, she just lives ten blocks from me and my grandma – my maternal grandmother, lives in the same neighborhood as well, so we actually, I get loads of help from them. Even if that help is just “Hey, I’m swinging by to take the baby for an hour and you can go do whatever you want.” It’s been really great.’

Eliza and her spouse each talked about how important family involvement, primarily from her family but also from his, was to their sense of feeling well supported as parents.

Another father, Patrick, commented, '[In] an ideal world, meet up with other young families be supportive, get support from them and hear what they did with their kids... surround ourselves with people that have the same thinking as we do.' His spouse reflected on the importance of having a social network as well as family support, 'I think the community support and family support is what's working for me, helping me be the kind of mom that I want to be.'

The focus on family support also was evident for a couple who did not have family locally. Ava commented, 'Family support. {laughs} If we were closer to family that would be an ideal world.' She added, 'I wouldn't want to abuse the support but we would HAVE support when we needed it, you know. But that would be ideal.' Similarly, her spouse reflected, 'In an ideal world, [Ava's] sister would be in it, some of her family would be closer [geographically]...my mother would be there.' Although the couple received emotional support through telephone and internet communication, they noted the lack of family locally to provide practical assistance. Recognizing that the geographic distance of extended family was unlikely to change, this couple had made a strategic decision to move to a neighborhood with young families where they could establish a supportive social network. The father concluded, 'We actually have neighbors now, with people we can count on for small things... people here that are in similar situations.'

***Support for a parent at home with young children.*** For a few couples, the ideal world of support for them as parents would position them to realize their preference to have one parent at home while their children were young. The father in one of these couples stated:

‘Ideally I wish I could make enough that [she] didn’t have to work and that she could just be a mom. But I mean, it just doesn’t - it wouldn’t be - we wouldn’t make ends meet that way. Right now anyways....Or vice versa. If she made enough and I could stay home.’

Similarly, his spouse, Tanya, commented, ‘I wonder if in an ideal world if I wouldn’t go to work. If I would just stay home.’ She had returned to part-time employment in the service sector, contributing earnings toward a middle income sense of financial stability. She talked about the constraints of her previous employment situations including her ineligibility for parental leave benefits, and identified these as contributors to the couple decision for her to return to the workforce:

‘I didn’t get any umm, like - maternity pay or anything from any of my jobs because they were all casual and they were all part-time and ...so, I guess in an ideal world I would’ve had maternity leave and I could have, you know, taken a year or two off. But part of that with pay.’

The couple shared the ideal of having one parent at home full-time with young children. They, however, also shared awareness that their current employment circumstances did not make this possible without compromising family financial stability.

***Support from education.*** Although several of the immigrant fathers and mothers focussed on workplace and family support, they also distinctively emphasized education to support them as parents. Fei-Yen, who had been educated as a lawyer in China before immigrating to Canada, responded unequivocally, ‘education’, to the ideal world question. This emphasis was reflected in her statement that, ‘I want to be a mother who is knowledgeable so I can educate him.’ Earlier in the interview, she had talked about

parenting in ethno-cultural context, 'In China, we always think children need to have early education. That will, you know, make them more smart.' Fei Yen's spouse described their challenges as immigrants, particularly in relation to his wish to have time to be involved as a father with his son, saying, 'It's ideal. It won't happen. Because now we study, after that we need to work... Now we get support from the government. Once my school finished, I need to find a job.' The couple had made the decision to access government financial support for them to upgrade their education in Canada. Their comments illustrated the combined focus among immigrant couples on education support for child development and for pursuit of future employment to ensure family financial security and provide opportunities for their children.

### **Discussion**

Our examination of participants' experiences at the intersections of social support, employment, ethno-cultural, and gender ideals for new parents as individuals and as couples makes a distinctive contribution to the body of research that examines couple experiences of first-time parenthood. In our study, fathers' and mothers' views of their ideal world of support highlight the intensity and complexity of family and paid work life for new parents. Men's and women's perspectives, analyzed separately, appeared to reflect 'his' and 'her' stories scripted within gendered family roles. Whereas fathers' ideal world was somehow to create time to be involved in caring for their children without compromising their capacity to fulfill primary provider responsibilities, mothers' ideal world was to receive close family support to fulfill primary care responsibilities. Their responses to an ideal world of support seemed remarkably modest in their individual focus on pragmatic consideration of current family and paid work

circumstances. In contrast, data analyzed as couple dyads revealed a more complex dynamic among multiple, often competing conditions that constructed and constrained individual choice and action. Participants' perspectives uncovered 'their' stories as a more nuanced narrative of confronting dominant social ideology as well as considering the pragmatics of their circumstances.

We identified ways that many of the couples contested dominant social ideals of individual and gendered family responsibility. During pregnancy, these couples' expectations revealed an acceptance of dominant social discourses and gendered ideals about parenthood and family that constrained the paid and family work alternatives they saw for themselves as parents (Kushner, et al., 2014). Reflecting on their experiences of the first 18 months of parenting, however, couples emphasized the need for greater workplace, social program, and policy support for parents, both fathers and mothers. Specifically, many fathers focused on the need for greater flexibility and support in the workplace, to provide paid work conditions such as flexible hours, manageable demands, and policy provisions consistent with achieving 'work-family balance'. Complementing this focus on workplace conditions, many of the mothers identified the need for greater access to high quality and affordable childcare to provide a caring nurturing environment for children that supported mothers' engagement in paid work. Men's and women's different yet complementary focus may be understood in relation to not only influences of gendered social ideals, but also the contrast between women's experiences of informally supportive workplace conditions and men's experiences of limited workplace support. Couples' focus on workplace and childcare conditions to support them to realize

their parenting ideals, particularly among the two-thirds of couples in which mothers as well as fathers were employed, contrasted substantially with their pre-birth perspectives.

Our finding that Chinese immigrant couples shared a distinctive focus on education support for them to realize their ideals as parents advances the relatively small body of research about immigrant new parents. In a Canadian study by Roer-Strier and colleagues (2005), Chinese immigrant fathers saw immigration as ‘an opportunity to enact a new dimension to their fatherhood’ (p. 322) by assisting their children in their new culture. Our findings about first time fathers’ focus on involvement with their children provide additional perspective to this earlier study. In our work, first time Chinese immigrant mothers’ emphasis on education to support child development is consistent with two recent studies (Guo, 2014; Tamis-LeMonda & Kahana-Kalman, 2009). In addition, parents in our study focused on support for them to attain education to enhance their capacity to provide financial security for their children; not only fathers but also several mothers held this perspective.

Although we interviewed men and women individually, our three-part analysis contributes a deeper understanding of new parents’ experiences than is achieved by reporting men’s and women’s experiences separately. Our analytic and reporting approach distinguishes our work from Miller’s (2005, 2007, 2010, 2011); while we share substantive interest in social support, employment, culture and gender ideals, Miller chose to examine fathers’ and mothers’ experiences separately. Our substantive interest also distinguishes our work from Fox’s (2009); while we used a similar analytic and reporting approach, Fox’s substantive emphasis on the division of labor within the couple



was more focused than our examination of social support, employment, ethno-cultural, and gender ideals and contexts.

Our findings reinforce that new parents' decisions and actions about paid and family work are influenced not only by personal ideals and preferences about fathering and mothering, but also by often complex family and paid work circumstances and by dominant social ideologies. Notably, although acceptance of a gendered division of primary parenting responsibilities was implicit in many couples' decisions, family socioeconomic circumstances were an explicit consideration among fathers and mothers regardless of their education, income, and employment position, as indicators of socioeconomic status. This distinction between implicit and explicit influences on couple decisions about paid and family work has been identified by Wiesmann et al (2008) in a study conducted in the Netherlands. In our study, circumstances explicitly considered by couples included economic resources and needs to support the family, employment opportunities, paid work conditions and ideals, access and adequacy of family policy provisions such as parental leave and child care, and dominant social ideals about gender and family. Couples across the range of socioeconomic indicators identified pressures for fathers to fulfill provider responsibilities. However, lower income, intense job demands, traditional male dominated workplaces, and perception of limited employment alternatives substantially amplified these pressures among participants.

Within current economic, labor market, and social environments, fathers' ideal involvement in family care work was, in practice, difficult for them to achieve due to their continuing responsibilities to provide financially. The image of the 'new' father that Henwood and Procter (2003) described as a 'new man who is devoted and nurturing at

home' and 'successful outside it... enjoying the best of both worlds at little significant cost and much convenience' (p. 340) seemed, for many fathers, potentially unrealizable. Yet, fathers' and mothers' awareness of these difficulties and their initiation of strategies to work toward realizing their ideals as parents can be interpreted optimistically as indications of progressive shifts in family and paid work dynamics in Canada.

Indeed, a social and family paradigm shift appears to be taking place in that fathers – like mothers – face the dual burden of family care and paid work responsibilities. Many couples explicitly identified the need for fathers to be supported to realign their family and paid work involvement and engage strategies to achieve 'balance'. They talked about the need for change in paid work practices and policy to support workers collectively to manage paid and family work life, yet used individual strategies to manage this realignment. This dynamic brings to mind C. Wright Mills' classic discussion of 'personal troubles and public issues' and the need for sociological imagination that 'enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals' (Mills, 2000, p. 5). The absence of collective challenge to current workplace ideals has been evocatively raised by Brady (2008) in her analysis of work-life balance initiatives and policies in Canada. Brady critiqued the current framing, not as 'progressive, and perhaps even radical' (p. 99), but as reinforcing individual responsibility and perpetuating gendered division of labor in families to resolve the problematic of work-life imbalance. She argued that this problem is socially and politically constructed within neo-liberal economy views in Canada about the costs of imbalance (e.g., worker absenteeism, illness, productivity loss,

health care consumption) and about the family as ‘a site of leisure, not work, and of consumption, not production’ (p. 119).

Our findings should be interpreted within the limitations of the context of early parenthood and the scope of the study. Researchers have found that new parents tend to gravitate toward a more traditional gendered division of paid and family work: in the early years, mothers are more likely to stay home with their infants while fathers continue to be employed (often) as sole providers (Bianchi, 2000; Fox, 2009). This tendency was apparent among our participant couples, most notably among those in which women chose not to return to the paid workforce, but should not be over-interpreted. On-going longitudinal study of couples’ experiences across the parenting life course is needed to understand how these early gendered divisions of primary responsibilities for paid and family work may shift over time and circumstances in families. Further, the findings from the comparatively small volunteer sample of Canadian-born and Chinese immigrant participants in our study cannot be generalized. Participants do not reflect the extensive diversity among families in Canadian society. The study of immigrant new parent experiences also should include attention to stages of acculturation to advance understanding of the interplay of dual transitions, parenthood and life in a new country, over time. Future study needs to include greater diversity in family composition including same sex couples, ethno-cultural heritage, and family attachment to the full range of occupation and workforce conditions.

Nonetheless, our current study findings emphasize the value of attending to couples’ experiences as parents over time. The tensions that fathers and mothers experience as they strive to live their ideals as parents in the context of dominant social

ideology, ethno-cultural ideals, and the pragmatics of their everyday family, workplace, and socioeconomic circumstances have effects on their own, as well as their partners' and children's well-being. To achieve a family friendly work–family integration for fathers and mothers, the complexity of the intersections among family, workforce, and community life must be acknowledged and further addressed (Miller, 2010; Voydanoff, 2007). Our research with fathers and mothers, as couples, over the first 18 months of parenting highlights the tensions that contribute to dis-ease in living up to fatherhood and motherhood ideals in the everyday family life of paid and family work. Our research also provides insights about shifts in expectations, strategies, and circumstances related to family and paid work that couples experience as they become parents. Our on-going research program will examine parents' experiences of family and paid work, in the context of their circumstances, decisions making, strategies, and personal and social ideals, as families progress through the life course of parenting. There is continuing need to expand understanding about how families make decisions in diverse circumstances to address current knowledge gaps that have theoretical and practical implications in the fields of family science, human ecology, and health promotion. In this endeavor, the study reported here raises for us more questions to explore, not only about contemporary family experiences in an increasingly diverse social and family context, but also about directions and strategies to promote individual and family well-being.

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Table 1

*Sample Demographics*

	Frequency	
	Women (n=19)	Men (n=19)
Age (years)		
20 – 24	3	0
25 – 29	3	6
30 – 34	12	7
35 – 39	1	6
Ethnicity		
Euro-Canadian	13	13
China	6	6
Partner status		
Married	16	16
Common-law	3	3
Years of education completed		
Incomplete High school	1	0
High school diploma	1	3
Incomplete post-secondary	1	2
Post-secondary trade/technical	2	3
Undergraduate degree	11	5
Graduate degree	3	6
Women's return to paid work		
Did not return	7	
Extended leave of absence	1	
Part time	5	
Full time reduced to part time	1	
Full time	5	
Occupation		
Technical	1	7
Paraprofessional	3	0
Business support	5/2*	0
Service	4/3*	0
Management	0	2
Professional	4/4*	8
Graduate student (professional)	2/1*	2
Annual family income (\$ Canadian)		
< 40 000		2
40 000 – 60 000		1
60 000 – 85 000		6
85 00 – 125 000		5
> 125 000		5

\*Women's occupations before/after the birth for women who returned to employment